

# WASHINGTON, STUNNED BY THEATER COLLAPSE, AWAITS INVESTIGATION

santly from 4 o'clock of the afternoon before. The snow drifts in the streets were shoulder high and the theater was warm and comfortable. The crowd was laughing at the start of the film—a comedy. The orchestra had finished a brief concert and was preparing to leave the pit.

Suddenly there was a crunching sound, a grinding, hissing noise, which lasted but a moment. Then the roof, center part first, toppled in on the balcony. One hundred and fifty persons were there.

This great weight, with iron girders, a monster ventilator, plaster, cement, decorations, everything, took with it the balcony when it fell. The balcony crashed on the floor below. The greatest loss of life was on the lower floor. By far the larger proportion of those in the balcony escaped with their lives, although virtually every person in the auditorium was injured.

The most accurate opinion as to what happened was that the snow, two and a half feet deep, had been too much for the roof. This theory is not entirely accepted, however, by building experts. They say that even this great amount of snow should not have caused the roof to collapse. The question has arisen of original faulty construction, to reduce to a minimum the number of supporting pillars so as not to interfere with a full view of the screen.

The auditorium measures approximately 150 feet in length by 100 in width. The roof in the center had a great ventilator, into which had been set a fan to keep the air of the auditorium in motion. It seems that an air shaft extended from this ventilator to the basement of the theater.

The first sign that something was wrong came a moment before the accident. The janitor in the basement told the authorities that a warning had come when a large quantity of snow shot down the shaft and into the basement. He had not the time, however, to sound an alarm much less to investigate.

Within another instant the entire theater seemed to collapse. The spectators, sitting there laughing, suddenly were deluged. The whole place was in darkness. Later it was possible to restore the lighting system to help the rescuers carry on their work.

## Doors Forced Open as Crash Comes.

It is fairly well settled that the roof broke in the center where the great metal ventilator rested. It forced the roof downward and inward and the snow on all sides slid toward it. The strain was too great and the whole mass broke through.

When the crash came the doors of the theater flew open and out poured clouds of white dust. The concussion had forced the doors ajar; the dust came from the plaster and concrete which had come down in a mass.

The condition of the streets, due to thirty hours of incessant snow, made the first work of rescue most difficult. Five apparatus, called at first, stuck in the snowdrifts. A total of eighteen fire engine companies, even from remote sections of the city, were called into action. Fortunately no fire came to add to the horror. Within an hour and a half ambulances were there from every section of the city, scores of physicians were on hand and soldiers, sailors and marines had been summoned to help in the rescue.

It was almost dawn before the full extent of the tragedy was realized even by those on the scene. There was no telling how many persons were in the wreckage; there was no telling how many had been in the theater. At midnight eight were known to have been killed; at 1 o'clock the list stood at ten, and at daybreak the total was placed at twenty-five. At that time, however, the rescue parties still had great quantities of the tangled wreckage, which in places was thirty feet deep, to explore.

As this is being written, almost thirty hours after the accident, the rescue squads had been unable to get to the bottom of the wreckage. Throughout last night the parties worked, lifting great iron girders, hauling out blocks of concrete and four fire engines were digging out the mass of twisted metal lath for the victims. Cries of anguish from the sufferers spurred them on in their task.

For the most part the victims lived in the immediate neighborhood. The disagreeable weather had restricted the attendance last night to those who could get to the show without great inconvenience. By far the greatest number of the injured and killed were within an area described by a circle the radius of which is half a mile from the theater, located at the corner of Eighteenth street and Columbia road.

Frantic relatives, some of them mothers and fathers who had watched their children start out only a few minutes before, broke through the police lines at first in order to reach the theater. But they were held in check at the entrance. They were gently pushed back with the argument that they must not interfere with the rescue.

Some of the wreckage within three or four hours after the accident were still alive and were rushed to the hospitals. They were all badly injured, some so seriously that they died before arriving at the wards for treatment. Others died in the arms of those who carried them.

The walls of the theater are still standing. The roof has been cut clear all around the edge as completely as if with a knife. The walls continued to menace the rescue parties as they worked through the day and the night.

## Salvation Army Gives Coffee and Sandwiches to Rescuers

At noon to-day the total dead had reached seventy-five. The number had grown to ninety-four when darkness came again, finding the firemen and soldiers still searching the debris. Word came that more bodies had been sighted in the wreckage.

Parties of soldiers with ropes pulled twisted steel girders out of the building. Sometimes it required thirty men to get them loose. This same procedure they followed in hauling out heavy blocks of concrete that had formed the steps of the balcony which had collapsed with the roof. Meanwhile others were prying into the debris for bodies.

Ambulance squads with stretchers stood in the lobby of the theater, which was intact. The bodies were taken out at intervals. At times an hour would pass before a body would be located. At one time eight bodies were found huddled in one group.

The cold and continuous snow which handicapped the rescue work during the night abated to-day and the snow started to melt, but it was fatiguing, difficult work. Salvation Army ladies were on hand in the theater lobby with sandwiches and coffee for the men who were digging into the debris. The firemen had not had relief when darkness came to-night. Occasionally one of them would drop exhausted and would be carried into what had been the confectionery and ice cream parlor of the theater. There were scores of minor injuries to the workers, who had to be taken to hospitals themselves.

Marine guards assigned to protect delegates to the International Arms Conference, were trained to the scene to serve in the double capacity of keeping the crowds from interfering with rescue work and from the walls, which were in constant danger of toppling.

Boy Scouts with their long poles kept away from the scene of the disaster to the Christian Science Church. Whenever a new body was found the stretcher bearers went through this line to the temporary morgue. The bodies were laid on the floor there, covered with blankets.

The condition of the streets, although somewhat relieved by the thawing weather, made it highly difficult for hearses and ambulances to get to and from the church to the homes of the victims or the undertaking establishments. Forty bodies had not been moved from noon from the improvised morgue.

Police guarded the entrance to the church. Friends and relatives of victims upon establishing their identity in the altar occupied by the reader, sat a policeman, checking up the identification list. When some one recognized a body it was marked with a tag pinned to the blanket.

In some instances the features of the victims were crushed beyond recognition. Identification in these cases was completed by search of the clothing. This was not so difficult in the case of men, who had letters and

Q. S. T. Q. S. T. If you wish to know what goes through the air tonight by wireless telephone, read the RADIO DEPARTMENT of The Globe. 3 cents at all newsstands—Ad.

## Crowds Besieging Wrecked Theater as Rescuers Work



## Theater Crash Saves Lives in Twelve Homes

Special Dispatch to THE NEW YORK HERALD, New York Herald Bureau, Washington, D. C., Jan. 29.

EARLY this morning various residents in the vicinity of the ill-fated Knickerbocker Theater were warned that their homes were unsafe because of the weight of snow on the roofs. They rushed to terror-stricken into the streets.

Only a few minutes after they were safely outside the roofs of twelve houses on T street, N. W., caved in.

The homes are understood to have been condemned by the building inspector and the escape of the occupants is regarded as miraculous.

## LIST OF INJURED IN THEATER CRASH

Continued from First Page.

SACKS, EDWARD A., New York city. SACK, HARRY F. SAEY, WALTER URD. SCHWAB, MRS. MATTIE. SHUGHNESSY, E. H., Second Assistant Postmaster-General. SHUGHNESSY, MRS. E. H. SMITHWICK, REPRESENTATIVE JOHN A. of Florida.

SWARD, ALBERT W. STRAYER, MARTHA. TAYLOR, MRS. GERTRUDE. TAYLOR, LIEUT.-COL. U. S. A. THEUNISSEN, LEONARD, AND ELIZABETH. THOMPSON, CHRISTIANA. UNDERWOOD, ETTA. UPDEW, CAROLINE.

URDON, NATHAN I. VAN POUCKE, ALPHONSO. WESSON, COL. C. M., U. S. A. WESSON, NANCY. WHITE, MISS MACLEAN. WILLIAMS, EDWARD A. WILSON, HENRY. WILSON, MISS EDELIN.

WEBB, MRS. JULIETTE. WOODRUFF, MISS INEZ. WILLIAMS, EDWARD A. YOUNG, MISS MARIE. YOUNGER, MRS. JOSEPH. ZALASKI, LIEUT., COMMANDER, medical officer of marine barracks, and his wife.

## VICTIM GIVES HIS LIFE THAT OTHERS BE SAVED

Albert Buehler Cited as Outstanding Hero of Disaster.

WASHINGTON, Jan. 29 (Associated Press).—Many brave deeds were reported to-day by rescuers working in the Knickerbocker Theater wreckage, but they said Albert G. Buehler of Washington was the outstanding hero, giving his own life that others might live.

He could have been taken from the debris full an hour before he was, but he directed the rescuers to aid others whom he declared more seriously hurt than he. He died after he was taken from the building.

Lieutenant V. M. Parsons of the Marine Corps, who assisted in directing the rescue work, gave graphic descriptions of many individual rescues.

"We were digging into the ruins," he said, "when we saw a tuft of red hair protruding. We uncovered a small boy, probably nine years old, who told us his little sister was beneath the pile of debris also. The girl was rescued, and neither she nor the boy was seriously hurt. We were certainly full of grief, but their mother near by was dead."

"Dr. Gearhart, a dentist, was found pinned beneath a I-beam. He told us we were endeavoring to extricate him that he had been conscious all night in that position. A woman beside him was dead."

"One man with long legs horribly broken asked for cigarettes as he was carried out on a stretcher. He joked with the rescuers about his mangled limbs, remarking that he had about six legs now. He was certainly full of grit. A group of two women and a man whom we were digging out also displayed remarkable nerve, talking with the men and directing their rescue."

He had given up hope when about 11:30 his son suddenly appeared. Instead of "going to the movies," he had met some other boys who live near by and they had decided to spend the evening in a neighbor's home.

## MAJORITY OF BODIES FOUND UNDER BALCONY WRECK

Spectators Who Sat Far Back on Main Floor of Theater Probably Escaped Death, as Beams Prevented Complete Collapse.

WASHINGTON, Jan. 29 (Associated Press).—Most of the bodies were recovered from the pit of the theater beneath the wreckage of the balcony or from the front of the balcony itself. Following the rule of motion picture audiences and with an almost empty house to pick from those on the main floor had grouped themselves in the rows of seats just below the front of the balcony. They were back far enough to see well and the front and back rows were almost empty.

At the point they had chosen the danger proved to be just double. Few of those seated there could have escaped. Even if the concrete slabs and steelwork of the roof missed them the solid mass of the balcony front came down on the first wreckage with crushing weight. The gleaming brass rails that adorned the balcony front lay spread over the wreckage of the roof fifteen feet below when rescuers reached the scene.

Those farther back on the main floor probably all escaped. The beams that supported the back end of the balcony did not let go their clutch on the wall. The wide sweep of seats they supported tilted down until the wreckage below took the weight of the front end, then stood covering the back rows of the main floor like a tent.

The front rows of the balcony were ground to a twisted mass of ruin. There was no wood in the structure. It was all steel and concrete, but the enormous weight of the balcony itself was sufficient to wind the tortured beams into fantastic shapes.

Here again chance played a part in reducing the number of victims. The front rows of the balcony, four or five deep, were "reserved" seats. They were priced above the succeeding rows and except when the house was jammed commonly were not all occupied. With the small attendance of last night, probably only a few had paid the extra price for these seats, preferring to sit further back in the balcony. And many of those behind scrambled up the steel slope of the fallen balcony to safety, although a number were struck down in the first blow when the roof came in. Some were hurled down into the pit wreckage when the balcony front fell and even some of these escaped with bruises. There is no record, however, of any survivor among those in the foremost balcony seats.

## Four Inquiries Promised to Fix Blame for Crash

Special Dispatch to THE NEW YORK HERALD, New York Herald Bureau, Washington, D. C., Jan. 29.

Four separate investigations of the Knickerbocker Theater collapse were under way or planned here to-day.

A fifth investigation may be conducted by a special committee of Congress, according to a statement by Representative Mondell, Republican House leader, and Senator Capron of Kansas, who says he has heard of building code violations in Washington.

The investigations already started or planned will be conducted by:

Coroner Nevitt, who plans to swear in a jury to-morrow.

District Attorney Peyton C. Gordon, who said he may lay before the Grand Jury the evidence which he collects.

Board of Commissioners of the District of Columbia, through the Building Department, which, under the law, must approve plans of any building before it can be erected.

Police Department.

Precautions to prevent the possibility of a similar disaster in any other theater under way here to-day by the Board of Commissioners, which under the law has charge of the administration of ordinances. Commissioner James Oyster ordered closed pending inspection of the Knickerbocker Theater wreckage, all theaters with roof construction similar to that of the Knickerbocker. The Commissioners also ordered that no theater be allowed to open for business unless its roof had been cleaned of snow. Strict orders to the police to enforce these orders were sent to all precincts.

Major Peyton Gordon, United States Attorney, said to-night that his investigation of the Knickerbocker Theater crash would begin to-morrow. All persons concerned in the construction, inspection, operation and ownership of the theater will be subpoenaed. Indictments will be asked for all individuals who are found to be responsible, charging them with criminal negligence, or manslaughter.

The Federal Grand Jury, which is now considering the case of Charles W. Morris, will be asked to-morrow morning by Attorney Gordon to begin an independent investigation, cooperating with the Department of Justice and aside from the inquiry which was ordered to-day by the District Commission.

"Everybody concerned in the operation and management of the theater," said Mr. Gordon, "will be subpoenaed before the Federal Grand Jury, including the officers and directors of the Knickerbocker Theater Company (Harry M. Crandall, president; A. E. Beltz, vice-president, and Harry Buckley, secretary), as well as the architects, builders, building inspectors and house managers, not forgetting the ticket seller, who are primarily responsible."

While the commissioners were beginning their investigation the theater management, headed by Harry M. Crandall, president, met and issued the following statement:

"We are stunned by this catastrophe. The Knickerbocker was the prize of our circuit. Constructed at no limit of

## President Voices Grief at Extent of Tragedy

WASHINGTON, Jan. 29 (Associated Press).—President Harding issued the following statement late to-day on the Knickerbocker Theater disaster:

I have experienced the same astounding shock and the same inexpressible sorrow which has come to all of Washington, and which will be sympathetically felt throughout the land. If I knew what to say to soften the sorrow of hundreds who are so suddenly bereaved, if I could say a word to cheer the maimed and suffering, I would gladly do it. The terrible tragedy, staged in the midst of the great storm, has deeply depressed all of us and left us wondering about the revolving fates.

Mr. Strayer came to Washington as correspondent of the Pittsburgh Gazette-Times twenty years ago. In 1903 he became correspondent of the Dispatch and had remained in charge of its Washington bureau since that date. Mr. Strayer was a native of Princeton, Ill., and began his newspaper career as a reporter on the Akron, Ohio, Beacon in 1877, going later to Pittsburgh to become a reporter on the Post, working later with other Pittsburgh newspapers, turning finally to political writing. He covered practically all the great political conventions of the last twenty years. He was a prominent member of the Gridiron Club and served as its president in 1916.

Mr. Strayer was a warm personal friend of the late Senator Philander C. Knox, who had such keen appreciation of Strayer's sense of humor that he frequently thought up excuses to take Strayer on trips with him merely for the sake of his company.

Chauncey C. Brainerd, one of the victims of the disaster, had been in charge of the Washington bureau of the Brooklyn Eagle since 1911, and was among the best known of the Washington correspondents. His wife, who also was killed, was Miss Edith Rathbone Jacobs, daughter of the late Inspector Jacobs of the Post Office Department. Before their marriage, in 1903, Mrs. Brainerd lived in Mount Vernon, Mr. Brainerd's father-in-law. He was a former managing editor of the New York Tribune and now Washington correspondent of the Philadelphia Evening Ledger.

Spent Boyhood in New York. Mr. Brainerd was born in New York in 1874, the son of Alanson Post Brainerd and Adella Corry Brainerd. He spent most of his boyhood in New Rochelle, and lived with an uncle in Lee Avenue, Brooklyn, after the deaths of his parents. In 1899 he became private secretary to St. Clair McKelway, editor in chief of the Eagle, and later joined the editorial staff. He was city editor for ten years, later managing editor for five, and was a large acquaintance with many public men in Washington. He had been for many years an active member of the Gridiron Club, and in December last

## SAW BALCONY SPIN AROUND IN DROPPING

Continued from First Page.

out over the snow and plaster, over the tangled debris, to the doors on the Eighth street side.

"Across the aisle from me when the crash came was a little fellow—I never saw him again and I wonder if he is dead—who laughed and roared at every especially funny part of the film. I don't know what became of him or the others in the balcony after we were showered with plaster."

"As the ceiling broke, the plaster fell first in chunks. It was just like an ice pond breaking up. The roof didn't give way in one crash. It seemed to break up ever so slowly, and then the snow, which came in through the broken places where the ceiling had given way."

"It's queer, but I was conscious all the time when I was pinned down there by that great piece of ceiling. In my mind, when I saw the ceiling falling and afterward, was just as clear and collected as it is now. I knew I was hurt, but I didn't know how badly. It seemed that my time had come. I lived a year, I tell you, pinned down between the seats."

"It wasn't until I got outside that I noticed blood falling from my face and hands. I got out myself. No one helped me. I crawled over the broken seats and plaster and snow to the door. On the way I saw a young fellow lying half buried up, moaning and crying for help. I leaned over to lift him, and then everything went black."

"The next I remember I was at the door, wiping the blood from my face and mouth. I don't know how I got out. I didn't see any other injured ones as I crawled out. I can't remember about that part of it. My only thought was to get home before I should die. My chest pained me, my back seemed broken, my face was dripping with blood. All I wanted to do was to get home and tell my wife and little girl what had happened and how I was hurt. I thought I was going to die."

Representative Smithwick, who lives about a block from the theater, said he staggered home without overcoat or hat through the snow drifts. Physicians were summoned immediately, who found him suffering from shock, bruises and possibly internal injuries.

"I think it was a miracle that I came out alive," said the Florida Representative. "But think of those poor children and men and women who were not so fortunate! I don't see how any who were under that balcony escaped. If those below could have seen the ceiling breaking they would have had time to rush out through the doors, but I guess they couldn't see as we could in the balcony. Those underneath us had no chance, I guess. I keep thinking of it all the time, that awful roaring and the crashing of the balcony on its way down to those people below. It was all over in half a minute, I guess, but it seemed hours."

U. S. VALUATION PLAN TO BE URGED TO-DAY

Convention of Manufacturers Will Ask Congress to Act.

Special Dispatch to THE NEW YORK HERALD, New York Herald Bureau, Washington, D. C., Jan. 29.

John E. Edgerton, president of the National Association of Manufacturers, who arrived here this afternoon to preside over the special convention to begin to-morrow morning for the purpose of urging Congress to take immediate action on the impending tariff bill, expressed confidence that not only would the whole tariff situation be cleared up soon but that the American valuation plan would be adopted. He will head a committee of twenty-five manufacturers from all parts of the country who will call on President Harding to-morrow afternoon.

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## STORM SAVED MANY FROM MOVIE CRASH

Wrecked Theater Popular With the Socially Prominent in Washington.

CORRESPONDENTS KILLED

Lewis Strayer and Chauncey Brainerd Among Dead—A.

J. Barchfeld a Victim.

Special Dispatch to THE NEW YORK HERALD, New York Herald Bureau, Washington, D. C., Jan. 29.

The fact that the Knickerbocker Theater is in one of the most popular residential sections of Washington is responsible for the presence within its walls last night of so many persons prominent in the social and public life of Washington.

In addition to being one of the newest of the large modern picture houses of Washington—it has been open only about three years—the Knickerbocker was of that type of theater which draws most of its patronage from persons whose residences are within easy walking distance.

Many Senators and members of the House were to be seen at the theater during ordinary evenings, and it was only the bad condition of the weather that prevented it from being filled last night with one of its regular Saturday night capacity throngs.

Among the dead and injured, in addition to those prominently connected with the official life of the capital, were many persons well known because of their long residence in Washington and their wide personal acquaintance.

Lewis W. Strayer, correspondent of the Pittsburgh Dispatch, and Chauncey C. Brainerd, correspondent of the Brooklyn Daily Eagle, were the men of this type. Both had been in Washington many years, and in addition to prominence in their own profession they were identified with the life of the city. Both were killed. Mrs. Brainerd, who was with her husband, also was killed.

In Washington 20 Years. "Lou" Strayer came to Washington as correspondent of the Pittsburgh Gazette-Times twenty years ago. In 1903 he became correspondent of the Dispatch and had remained in charge of its Washington bureau since that date. Mr. Strayer was a native of Princeton, Ill., and began his newspaper career as a reporter on the Akron, Ohio, Beacon in 1877, going later to Pittsburgh to become a reporter on the Post, working later with other Pittsburgh newspapers, turning finally to political writing. He covered practically all the great political conventions of the last twenty years. He was a prominent member of the Gridiron Club and served as its president in 1916.

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